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UNH Media Relations

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April 13, 2006

DURHAM, N.H. -- Teamwork. Leadership. Personal growth. Health and fitness. The benefits of team sports are well-known and plentiful. But some of the positive experiences of athletics are hidden in a deep, dark closet, says University of New Hampshire researcher Heather Barber, especially for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) athletes and coaches.

Barber, associate professor of kinesiology and a sport psychology consultant, has been exploring identity issues and tensions associated with sexual orientation in sport with Vikki Krane of Bowling Green State University for more than five years. Their work breaks new ground in the field of sport studies.

"Sexual orientation in sport, while it has been alluded to forever, really hasn't been spoken about," says Barber. "We call it the elephant in the locker room."

In a study published recently in the Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport, Barber and Krane investigated the experiences of lesbian college coaches and found a consistent tension between their identities as coaches and as lesbians. All but one of the 13 coaches who participated (the small sample size was due in part to the difficulty in recruiting participants, despite promises of complete anonymity) concealed their lesbian identity to some degree in the coaching environment.

"We knew about it, but we didn't know how significant it was," says Barber.

Coaches avoided revealing details of their personal lives to their players, despite the warm "family" atmosphere that often develops within a team. "We had coaches who chose to live 45 minutes away from campus, so they weren't part of the campus community," says Barber, noting that such a lengthy commute can be onerous to a coach who's already working long hours and late games.

One of the major concerns of the coaches, says Barber, was the fear of negative recruiting. The practice, fairly widespread but clandestine, involves coaches trying to influence a high school athlete's college choice by speaking negatively of other schools the recruit is considering. In cases of homophobic negative recruiting, the researchers found, savvy coaches would have "back door" conversations with recruits or their families in which they suggested a coach at a rival school didn't embrace "good family values."

"Sometimes it backfires, but rarely," says Barber. As the stakes get higher in women's collegiate sports, particularly for Division I schools, "it's clear that these coaches can do the job. Getting the athletes in the door is what makes you successful."

Although Barber and Krane struggled to get their initial research published, the subject of homophobia in college athletics is gaining traction. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is beginning to examine the issue, and It Takes a Team, a project of the Women's Sports Foundation, is a clearinghouse for education about homophobia in sport.

And a current suit against Penn State University women's basketball coach Rene Portland, who allegedly has engaged in discriminatory practices against lesbians and negative recruiting for several decades, is bringing media attention to the issue (and to Barber, who is sought after for expert commentary).

Says Barber, the attention is overdue.

"This issue doesn't just affect gay or lesbian athletes, it affects all athletes if it changes the experience," she says. "As coaches and team members, we make great claims about sport. This is about creating an environment where athletics is as good as we say it is."